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What Aristotle Should Have Said About *Megalopsychia*

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Megalopsychia, literally the greatness of soul, also translated as pride, or magnanimity, is a virtue Aristotle attributes to the good person regarding his claim to be worthy of great things, namely, honor. He says, “Honor and dishonor then are the objects with which the great-souled man is especially concerned.”¹ Like other virtues which are means between two extremes, Aristotle’s *megalopsychia* too is a mean between the two extremes of vanity and humility. He explains that vanity is the flaw of thinking that one is worthy of great things when one is not; humility that of thinking that one is worthy of less than one is. In spite of this definition regarding the *megalopsychos*’ claim to honor, commentators like C. Rowe, H. Curzer, R. Polansky and J. Stover, all chose to de-emphasize the centrality of honor in Aristotle’s definition of *megalopsychia*.² Such an approach is undoubtedly fueled by Aristotle’s own remark that the *megalopsychos* takes honor to be a little thing (*hê timê micron esti* 1124a19). Moreover, the fact that Aristotle asserts that honor is the greatest external good³ also seems to be in tension with *megalopsychia* as a virtue that is to be pursued for its own sake, not to mention its tension with his remark that friendship is the greatest external good.⁴

In this essay, I seek to examine if these apparent contradictions are real for Aristotle’s *megalopsychia* and offer an account of what he should have said about *megalopsychia* to be consistent with the concept of honor itself and with his ethics as a whole. The key to understanding *megalopsychia*, in my view, turns on its object of honor and the fact that honor is a relation between the one who is honored and those who honor him. Consequently, any reading which ignores either the virtue of the *megalopsychos*, or the people who honor him, would be inconsistent with the relational nature of the concept of honor itself.

Aristotle’s *megalopsychia* is not just about a proper estimation of one’s worth or desire for honor, for that pertains to the proper desire of (small) honors too. He says, “honor may be desired (*orexei*) more than is right, or less, or from the right sources and in the right way. We blame both the ambitious man (*philotimon*) as aiming at honor (*timês*) more than is right and from wrong sources, and the unambitious man as not willing to be honored even for noble (*epi tois kalois*) reasons.”⁵ And, “he who is worthy of little (*micrôn axios*) and thinks himself worthy of little is temperate (*sôphrôn*), but not proud; for pride implies greatness (*en megethei*), as beauty implies a good-sized body, and little people (*hoi microi*) may be neat and well-proportioned (*sumetroi*) but cannot be beautiful.”⁶ Instead of just the proper estimation of one’s worth or the desire for honor, both of which apply to small honors, *megalopsychia* is about great things. The greatest thing that the *megalopsychos* could claim for his noble deeds is the external good of (great) honor. To be worthy of great honor, the *megalopsychos* must be completely good. As Aristotle puts it, “the truly proud man (*alêtheia megalopsychon*) must be good” and “it is hard to be truly proud; for it is impossible without nobility and goodness of character (*kalokagathias*).”⁷

The *megalopsychos* possesses the highest virtue for which he is honored. He has the qualities like courage, generosity, justice, truthfulness, wisdom and the rest of the Aristotelian virtues since Aristotle links his great desert to his possession of complete virtue.⁸ Aristotle characterizes his *megalopsychos* as one who “does not run into trivial dangers, nor is he fond of danger because he honors few things; but he will face great dangers, and when he is in danger he is unsparing of his life, knowing that there are conditions on which life is not worth having.”⁹ The reference in this passage to the proud man’s not running into little dangers and his not being fond of dangers is controversial for Aristotelian commentators. It is of a piece with this passage:

it is characteristic of the proud man not to aim at the things commonly held in honor (*entima*), or the things in which others excel; to be sluggish and to hold back except where great honor or a great work is at stake, and to be a man of few deeds, but of great and notable ones (*megalôn kai onomastôn*).¹⁰

¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, (hereafter NE) IV.3, 1124a5-6.

² See p. 7 below for details of these authors’ views.

³ NE IV.3, 1123b20-21.

⁴ NE IX.8, 1169b11.

⁵ NE IV.4, 1125b7-12.

⁶ NE IV.3, 1123b5-8.

⁷ NE IV.3, 1124a3-5.

⁸ “Greatness of soul seems therefore to be as it were a crowning ornament of the virtues: it enhances their greatness, and it cannot exist without them” (NE IV.3, 1124a1-3).

⁹ 1124b7-9.

¹⁰ 1124b23-28.

Taken together, some critics maintain that the *megalopsychos* neglects common virtuous deeds in favor of great deeds, and charge that Aristotle's account of *megalopsychia* is inconsistent. For instance, commentators like Engberg-Pedersen and Sherman allege that the *megalopsychos* neglects ordinary virtues. On this issue, I agree with Howard Curzer that Aristotle provides ample evidence for the *megalopsychos*' virtue so that such a charge is unfounded.¹¹ I believe that this passage about the *megalopsychos*' holding back or being one of few deeds could mean that in the presence of others who can perform actions requiring less danger or a lesser degree of other virtues, e.g., acts requiring generosity instead of magnificence, the *megalopsychos* would hold back. He lets the others act and earn the smaller honors, knowing his own capacity for greater actions.¹² To say that the *megalopsychos* holds back does not mean that he would not act or would neglect the ordinary virtuous actions, especially when no one else is around to act. Such a reading would mean that he is not virtuous. Since Aristotle relates honor to virtue, and repeatedly asserts the proud man's possession of perfect virtue, a contrary interpretation would fail to account for too many passages, let alone undermine his definition of honor.¹³ The *megalopsychos* not only considers his own, but also others' honor. Thus, the *megalopsychos* is just; he would not wrong another: "to what end should he do disgraceful acts, he to whom nothing is great?"¹⁴ Aristotle asks. He reminds us that the *megalopsychos* would not be bad for that would make him unworthy of honor.

In spite of the *megalopsychos*' pride, Aristotle says that "he will also bear himself with moderation (*metriôs*) towards wealth and power and all good or evil fortune (*eutukian kai atukian*). . . , For not even towards honor does he bear himself as if it were a very great thing."¹⁵ Aristotle's remark that the *megalopsychos* takes honor to be a little thing (*hê timê micron esti* 1124a19) is difficult to square with his claim that the *megalopsychos* not only thinks himself worthy of great things, but claims great honor. How could someone whose main concern is the performance of noble deeds for which he claims great honors think that honor is a little thing? Aristotle says, "It is chiefly (*malista*) with honors and dishonors (*peri timas kai atimias*), then, that the proud man is concerned; and at honors that are great and conferred by good men (*tôn spoudaiôn*) he will be moderately pleased . . . but honor from casual people and on trivial grounds he will utterly despise, since it is not this that he deserves, and dishonor too, since in his case it cannot be just (*ou dikaiôs*)."¹⁶ Is the *megalopsychos*' utter despise of honor from the common people consistent with his little regard for honor? As Tony Cua observed, Aristotle undermines the established standards of his time about honor.¹⁷ Aristotle does this by attributing to common opinion the role that external goods play in *megalopsychia*. He says, "The goods of fortune also are *thought* to contribute towards pride. For men who are well-born are thought worthy of honor, and so are those who enjoy power or wealth; for they are in a superior position, and everything that has a superiority in something good is held in greater honor."¹⁸ Contrary to these opinions, Aristotle says, "in truth (*kat' alêtheian*) the good man alone (*ho agathos monos*) is to be honored (*timêteos*)."¹⁹ But he appears to contradict himself when he adds, "he, however, who has *both* advantages [i.e., fortune and virtue] is thought the more worthy of honor."²⁰

One way to clarify Aristotle's seeming ambivalence toward honor as the greatest external good and the relevance of the lesser goods of fortune is to consider the instrumental role fortune plays in virtue. In *NE* I.8 when

¹¹ See Howard J. Curzer's "Aristotle's Much Maligned Megalopsychos," (hereafter, AMMM) *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 69, no. 2 (1991): 131-151, especially 140-142 for Curzer's responses to such a criticism of the *megalopsychos* by T. Engberg-Pedersen and Nancy Sherman. I am also sympathetic with Curzer's reading that the *megalopsychos* holds back on ordinary actions if they are in competition with greater deeds at the time.

Others like R-A Gauthier, tries to explain Aristotle's *megalopsychos*' detachment and the paucity of actions by saying that he is a philosopher whose concern is the intellectual virtue of contemplation rather than the political-practical virtues. Here, I agree with W. F. R. Hardie's criticism of Gauthier's position. Hardie finds Gauthier's view implausible since he does not explain why Aristotle does not mention contemplation in his discussion of magnanimity and vice versa. See Hardie, "'Magnanimity' in Aristotle's Ethics," *Phronesis*, vol. 23 (1978): 63-79, especially 67-69.

¹² My reading is compatible with Dirk Held's view that Aristotle's *megalopsychos* is "socially constituted" (103), and pride being an instance of what he calls the "co-operative over competitive virtues" (108). See Dirk Held, "Μεγλοψυχία in *Nicomachean Ethics* iv," *Ancient Philosophy* 13 (1993): 95-110. My interpretation of the *megalopsychos*' holding back in ordinary actions so that others can pursue the small honors exemplifies Held's view of *megalopsychia* as a co-operative virtue.

¹³ Passages about the *megalopsychos*' possession of virtue include: 1123b2-3, b6, b35, 1124a1-4, a7-8, a25, 28-29.

¹⁴ 1123b33.

¹⁵ 1124a13-17.

¹⁶ 1124a5-13.

¹⁷ Antonio S. Cua, "The Ethical Significance of Shame: Insights of Aristotle and Xunzi," *Philosophy East & West*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2003): 147-202. See especially 157.

¹⁸ 1124a21-23, my italics.

¹⁹ 1124a25.

²⁰ 1124a26, my italics.

discussing instrumental external goods, he says, “Nonetheless, happiness evidently also needs external goods to be added, . . . since we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources. . . . in many actions we use friends, wealth, and political power just as we use instruments.”²¹ Thus, external goods are resources needed for great actions, the kind that the *megalopsychos* undertakes since he is said to be “a man of few . . . great and notable [deeds].”²² In fact, it is questionable if someone could become a *megalopsychos* if he lacked the type of external goods for blessedness, e.g., being well-born.²³ Consider how someone born into slavery would never have the same opportunities to be educated, habituated into the virtues, become a citizen and participate in politics. To be consistent with his own assertion about the necessity of external goods for virtue, Aristotle cannot exclude external goods entirely from *megalopsychia*. It is true that the good man is honored. But if he cannot become good without fortune, there is some truth to the opinion which regards fortune’s contribution to pride. Thus, Aristotle’s remark that the person who has *both* fortune and virtue is thought to be more worthy of honor, is more consistent with his overall position.

Having salvaged the role of external goods (including honor), for virtue in Aristotle, the contradiction between the *megalopsychos*’ low estimation of honor and the proud man’s primary concern with honor, remains. I now propose three ways of assessing the *megalopsychos*’ little regard for honor. I look at (i) *megalopsychia* as the crown of virtue, (ii) the *megalopsychos*’ self-knowledge, and (iii) how his self-knowledge relates to his friends who honor him. All three considerations have implications for his actions and ultimately, for how he ought to regard honor.

(i) *Megalopsychia* is the crown of virtue for Aristotle: “Pride, then, seems to be a sort of crown (*kosmos*) of the virtues (*tôn aretôn*); for it makes (*poiei*) them greater (*meizous*), and does not come to be (*ou ginetai*) without them.”²⁴ A fact of honor which commentators too frequently ignore in Aristotle is that it is related to *those* who do the honoring. Aristotle claims, “‘Worthy’ is a term of relation (*pros*).”²⁵ These commentators’ neglect of the one who bestows honor frequently leads to their de-emphasizing the centrality of honor in Aristotle’s definition of *megalopsychia*. For example, C. Rowe maintains that the prideful man’s right relationship to honor “is surely only a consequence of his *megalopsychia*, not *megalopsychia* itself.”²⁶ Curzer elaborates this by saying that the notion of honor is just a means to reveal other essential characteristics of the *megalopsychos*, such as his great virtue (519) and his self-knowledge (520) regarding his true worth. Curzer says, “so *megalopsychia* is formally defined essentially as greatness of virtue plus a certain sort of self knowledge. A relationship to honor is not central to the formal definition of *megalopsychia*” (520).

Similarly, Stover and Polansky interpret the proud man’s little regard for honor from the great by saying “so he may fit our concept of the humble person.”²⁷ This interpretation is questionable as humility, for Aristotle, is the defective extreme of *megalopsychia*. But these authors offer no explanation for their contradiction. Like Curzer, they take the primary meaning of pride to be the *megalopsychos*’ self-evaluation of his true worth (355). Since nothing can compare to his great virtue, they even liken his immunity to fortune to the achievement of *ataraxia* in Hellenistic philosophy (356).

I disagree with these commentators because they disregard Aristotle’s assertion that “honor and dishonor . . . are the objects with which the *megalopsychos* is especially concerned,”²⁸ and they fail to account for the aspect of honor which relates to the external goods (*ektos agatha*) to oneself, namely, the people who bestow honor.²⁹ More

²¹ 1099a29-b2.

²² 1124b26-27.

²³ 1099b2-5. I differ from Howard Curzer who asserts that great external goods are regarded by the majority as “his desert rather than as necessary conditions of his *megalopsychia*” (135, AMMM). Contrary to Curzer’s belief, I think that if the *megalopsychos* possesses complete virtue, then he would also be magnificent. But great wealth is needed for magnificent deeds. Hence wealth cannot be construed as the proud man’s desert rather than prerequisite for great deeds involving great expenditures.

²⁴ 1124a1-2.

²⁵ 1123b17.

²⁶ Quoted by Howard Curzer, “A Great Philosopher’s Not So Great Account of Great Virtue: Aristotle’s Treatment of ‘Greatness of Soul,’” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 20.4 (1990): 517-538, 519.

²⁷ James Stover and Ronald Polansky, “Moral Virtue and *Megalopsychia*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 23 (2003): 351-359, 355.

²⁸ 1124a5-6.

²⁹ See how Curzer totally disregards these aspects by emphasizing the proud man’s self-sufficiency (“A Great Philosopher’s Not So Great Account of Great Virtue,” op cit, 532). See also 135, AMMM where he maintains that *megalopsychia* is consistent with the lack of wealth and power. See Alexander Sarch, “What’s Wrong with *Megalopsychia*?” *The Royal Institute of Philosophy* (2008): 231-253, for his argument against Roger Crisp’s emphasis on the proud man’s virtue as the motivation for his actions, in preference for Christopher Corder’s account which stresses the proud man’s motivation by honor. I agree with Sarch that commentators like Crisp (with whom I’ll include Curzer and Stover and Polansky) cannot account for those passages where Aristotle maintains that the *megalopsychos* “both desires honor and actively seeks to obtain it” (239).

elaborately, the proud man is not just one who realizes his great self-worth as these commentators have emphasized. Rather, he is also concerned to be honored by other good men instead of common men. This is why Aristotle contrasts being honored by *spoudaioi* with the common people; the former brings pleasure whilst the latter is despised. If *megalopsychia* is the crown of virtue, then “who” does the crowning, so to speak, is significant. To be crowned by other honorable people like oneself would magnify one’s virtues. The *megalopsychos* not only knows that he is completely virtuous and thus is worthy of great honor, but also knows that he deserves to be honored by others who truly know great virtues.³⁰ Due to the significance of *megalopsychia* as a crown or magnifier of virtues, which is in part determined by those who do the honoring, and in part by the proud man’s own complete goodness, a low estimation of the honor he received would contradict Aristotle’s own definition of honor as the object of the *megalopsychos*’ concern, and the pleasure he should take in honor from the right sources.

Moreover, were the proud man truly motivated by great and notable deeds, which are greatly honored, his low-estimation of being honored could also skew his perception of great deeds, leading him to withhold from them. Since the *megalopsychos* is especially concerned with the objects of honor, it is unlikely that he would be mistaken in his perception of great deeds. Hence, it is also unlikely that his perception of great deeds would have been skewed by a low-estimation of being honored.

(ii) Aristotle maintains that the unduly humble person lacks self-knowledge because he does not think that he is worthy of great things nor desires them. Just as the unduly humble person lacks self-knowledge and falls short of carrying out noble actions, the *megalopsychos*’ underestimation of honor could also be regarded as a lack of self-knowledge, leading him to act less than he would have. Since Aristotle contrasts the *megalopsychos* with the humble person with respect to self-knowledge, the *megalopsychos* can neither underestimate honor nor lack the desire for it.

(iii) Self-knowledge and friendship: That it is inappropriate for the *megalopsychos* to belittle honor is especially apparent when we consider his relation to friends, and how friendship can provide him with pleasure and knowledge. Like honor, Aristotle calls friendship the greatest external good.³¹ Unless honor and friendship are closely related, he would be contradicting himself in calling each of these the greatest external good.³² To see the relation between honor and friendship, let us first get clear about the relation between the good person and pleasure, and how the pleasure of goodness can be derived from friends. 1. Aristotle maintains that because of the virtuous person’s goodness, his activities are pleasant in themselves. 2. He also asserts that someone is able to observe his friend better than himself. 3. Since the virtuous person can see his friend’s activities better than his own, and as they are like his own, he takes pleasure in observing his friend’s actions.

Next, let us see how the observation of one’s friend can lead to knowledge for Aristotle. 4. Aristotle maintains that a friend is related to one as another self.³³ 5. So the good man’s better observation of his friend leads not only to his knowing his friend’s excellence, but also to knowing his own virtue.³⁴ 6. Although Aristotle claims that the *megalopsychos* does not depend on others, for he does not make his life revolve around another, he also maintains that the proud man makes his life revolve around a friend.³⁵ 7. Add to this Aristotle’s prioritizing honor conferred by good men over honor from common men, great honor conferred by good men or friends, should not be regarded lightly by the *megalopsychos*. 8. To the extent that being honored by excellent friends contributes to one’s contemplation, self-knowledge, virtuous deeds and pleasure in the virtues, it should remain the primary object of concern for the *megalopsychos*. Contrary to Aristotle’s assertion then, the *megalopsychos* should regard honor as a very great thing.

Herein too lies the resolution to the apparent contradiction between Aristotle’s assertion that both honor and friendship are the greatest external goods. Since his virtuous friends are the ones who rightly honor him, causing him to have self-knowledge and pleasure, in addition to making his virtues greater, honor and friendship are inseparable. Hence, Aristotle is perfectly consistent in attributing to both friendship and honor, the status of the

³⁰ Since I believe that Aristotle’s great-souled person must be complete in his virtues, I disagree with Curzer who maintains that both the *megalopsychos* and those who honor him are imperfect. See AMMM, 134: “Most real *megalopsychoi* probably fall short of perfection, yet are still substantially more virtuous than the bestowers of honour.” See 1124a7-8, & a28-29 for Aristotle’s claims about the proud man’s possession of complete virtue.

³¹ 1169b11.

³² Because Aristotle attributes the status of the greatest external good to both honor and friendship, I think that Neil Cooper, “Aristotle’s Crowning Virtue,” *Apeiron* (1989):191-205, is mistaken in prioritizing friendship over honor for Aristotle.

³³ 1170b6-7.

³⁴ This is what Aristotle means when he asserts that even though the wise person is able to study by himself, he does so better with friends (1177a33-b1).

³⁵ 1125a1. Note how those who stress self-sufficiency in the proud man frequently ignore this passage about his dependence on friendship.

greatest external good. The significance of friendship for virtues in general, and for honor in particular, reveals the proper attitude the *megalopsychos* should have toward it, namely, that of high estimation.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that the tension between the virtuous person's activities which are to be honored, and his alleged relative disregard for being honored in Aristotle arises from the nature of honor itself. Apart from being a virtue that is expressed by exercising virtues that are within one's control, honor is a relational concept which conferral depends on others. Hence, it is an external good that is beyond one's control. Nevertheless, to the extent that the person to be honored is affected by others' acknowledgement, Aristotle errs in downplaying his regard for honor. Not being properly honored, nor claiming deserved honor for Aristotle affects the *megalopsychos*' self-knowledge and his actions. The result is that he has less self-knowledge and performs fewer virtuous acts. Since there are both internal and external aspects of honor, corresponding to the exercise of virtue on the one hand, and the conferral of honor on the other hand, Aristotle is mistaken in emphasizing the internal and de-emphasizing the external, respectively. Ultimately, like all relational concepts, honor consists of both one's worthiness, and the honor conferred. Consequently, both are relevant to the concept of *megalopsychia*.